



October 20, 2017

Asish Desai  
General Services Administration  
Region 4  
Martin Luther King Building  
77 Forsyth Street, Atlanta, GA 30303  
Via e-mail to: ashish.desai@gsa.gov

Re: Draft Environmental Assessment, Proposed Federal Courthouse, Anniston, Alabama

Dear Ms. Desai,

I am writing in support of the Alabama Historical Commission's comments that Block 151/159 be the preferred site and that "the City Hall Site and Block 149 Site be completely avoided." Of the options GSA has chosen, it does the least damage to the Downtown Anniston Historic District, a district that has already been eroded by the City of Anniston through their demolition of the entire block on which the Anniston City Land Company was formerly located. The loss of that local landmark was coupled with the demolition of the former city police station – a resource that had significance to the local Civil Rights history – as well as a couple of other modest contributing resources. Together with the loss of the old Union Station to neglect and fire, the historic character of this district has eroded significantly over the past few years.

Many years ago, the city was negotiating with another federal court to expand downtown. At the time, the AHC and local officials negotiated deal where the City Hall building would be demolished for a new court facility with the quid pro quo that the Anniston City Land Company building would be rehabilitated as the new city hall. It wasn't an ideal option, but the City Hall building was a noncontributing resource in the National Register nomination in place at the time (although the AHC determined that it was eligible and it was reclassified under the existing updated nomination) and the opportunity to rehabilitate the Land Company building was considered the more significant positive impact. Since that time, the city decided to tear down the entire block on which the Land Company building sat, thereby negating the option of mitigating the loss of City Hall through its rehabilitation.

GSA has held tightly to the three options we have on the table and reviewed and rejected a fourth option to expand adjacent to its existing facility. The city seems to favor the City Hall site because it results in them getting a new city hall but also because that location is perceived as being better

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situated to stimulate redevelopment downtown. While I generally agree with the latter, the cost in terms of the loss of fabric in the historic district is difficult to support.

All that said, it has constantly escaped me why GSA hasn't explored simply shifting their new facility one half block to the west on either the City Hall block or Block 149. Either would result in having to block Moore Avenue, but the block 151/159 alternative requires the blockage of Walnut Street. Doing so on the City Hall site would avoid the demolition of City Hall and the adjacent county building, would likely result only in the loss of three noncontributing resources, and would still be located close to Noble Street. A similar approach on Block 149 would allow for the retention of the buildings along the south side of Gurnee Street, thereby preserving the nationally-significant streetscape in front of the bus station and buffering the new courthouse from its view. It would, however, result in the loss of an entire block of contributing resources, but is mitigated to a degree by the deteriorated conditions of the buildings involved.

Long story short, given the alternatives, Block 151/159 is the better one in terms of its impact on the Downtown Anniston Historic District. Shifting the courthouse one-half block west on the City Hall is the better option that nobody is talking about.

Sincerely,

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David Schneider  
Principal, Schneider Historic Preservation, LLC DBS/jm